

**STATEMENT OF
RANDALL H. WALKER
DIRECTOR OF AVIATION
CLARK COUNTY, NEVADA**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION, AND PUBLIC LANDS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**ON
H.R 4285
PROVIDING FOR THE CONVEYANCE OF CERTAIN PUBLIC LAND IN CLARK
COUNTY, NEVADA, FOR USE AS A HELIPORT
SEPTEMBER 14, 2004**

THANK YOU MR. CHAIRMAN. MY NAME IS RANDALL H. WALKER AND I APPEAR BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE AS THE DIRECTOR OF AVIATION FOR CLARK COUNTY, NEVADA. THE DEPARTMENT OF AVIATION (CCDOA) OWNS AND OPERATES LAS VEGAS - McCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. McCARRAN AIRPORT, FULFILLING ITS CRITICAL ROLE AS A GATEWAY FOR NEARLY 50% OF ALL VISITORS TO LAS VEGAS, WILL HANDLE IN EXCESS OF FORTY (40) MILLION PASSENGERS IN 2004. IN ADDITION, CCDOA OPERATES A SYSTEM OF FIVE GENERAL AVIATION (GA) AIRPORTS PROVIDING MUCH NEEDED CAPACITY RELIEF TO McCARRAN.

TODAY I APPEAR BEFORE YOU, MR. CHAIRMAN; TO URGE SUPPORT FOR H.R. 4285 WHICH IS URGENTLY NEED TO ADDRESS A PRESSING AVIATION ISSUE, NAMELY HELICOPTER NOISE OVER RESIDENTIAL AREAS WITHIN LAS VEGAS. BECAUSE OF OUR TOURISM BASED ECONOMY, LAS VEGAS HAS BECOME THE PRIMARY JUMPING-OFF POINT FOR VISITS TO THE GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK. A PORTION OF THOSE VISITS OCCUR AS HELICOPTER AIR TOURS ORIGINATING FROM McCARRAN AIRPORT.

AN EXPANDING SEGMENT OF THE LAS VEGAS TOURIST EXPERIENCE IS THE GRAND CANYON HELICOPTER AIR TOUR OPERATIONS WHICH HAVE INCREASED BY APPROXIMATELY 50% OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS AND NOW EXCEED ALMOST 65 THOUSAND OPERATIONS PER YEAR. GIVEN THE NUMBER OF NEW HOTEL ROOMS UNDER CONSTRUCTION, CCDOA CAN ONLY SURMISE THAT THIS GROWTH WILL CONTINUE INTO THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. BELOW IS A CHART WHICH SHOWS THE GROWTH IN HELICOPTER OPERATIONS FROM LAS VEGAS WHICH TRAVERSES TROPICANA AND CHARLESTON BOULEVARDS, HEAVILY POPULATED AREAS OF THE VALLEY.

AVERAGE DAILY CORRIDOR USE - AUGUST

CORRIDOR	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
TROPICANA	58	60	66	89	93
CHARLESTON	58	66	63	83	91

THE HELICOPTER AIR TOUR DEPARTURE AND RETURN CORRIDORS DIRECT THE HELICOPTERS OVER OLDER, ESTABLISHED NEIGHBORHOODS. SOME 90,000+ RESIDENTS HAVE LIVED IN THESE HOMES FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS WITH NO EXPECTATION OF WHAT THEY ARE NOW SUBJECTED TO. *(SEE EXHIBIT 1 – 2004 HELICOPTER TOUR RADAR FLIGHT TRACKS FROM McCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT)*

THE NOISE IS EXAGGERATED BECAUSE THE HELICOPTERS MUST REMAIN AT A LOW ALTITUDE (AS LOW AS 800 FEET ABOVE GROUND LEVEL) AND WITHIN THE PRESCRIBED CORRIDORS TO AVOID TRAFFIC CONFLICTS WITH FIXED-WING AIRCRAFT FLIGHTS OPERATING AT NELLIS AIR FORCE BASE, THE NORTH LAS VEGAS AIRPORT AND McCARRAN AIRPORT.

UNDER FEDERAL LAW ENACTED IN THE EARLY 1990'S DESIGNED TO PREVENT COMMUNITIES FROM IMPOSING AIRLINE NOISE CONTROLS AT LOCAL AIRPORTS, CCDOA AS THE OPERATOR OF A FEDERALLY FUNDED AIRPORT CANNOT PREVENT THE HELICOPTERS FROM USING McCARRAN AIRPORT OR IN ANY WAY TAKE AN ACTION THAT COULD BE DEEMED TO DISCRIMINATE AGAINST THE TOUR OPERATORS. RATHER, CCDOA MUST DEVELOP AN ALTERNATIVE HELIPORT THE OPERATORS WILL VOLUNTARILY CHOOSE TO MOVE TO BECAUSE THEY DEEM IT TO BE IN THEIR BEST FINANCIAL INTEREST.

THE COUNTY'S ACQUISITION OF A PARCEL OF VACANT, FEDERALLY OWNED LAND CALLED FOR IN THIS BILL IS THE BEST ANSWER WE HAVE TO THIS PROBLEM. CCDOA'S INTENT IS TO CONSTRUCT ON THE SITE A FACILITY TO WHICH THE AIR TOUR OPERATORS WILL WILLINGLY RELOCATE. THIS BILL PROVIDES FOR THE TRANSFER OF THE 229 ACRES OF BLM LAND FOR THIS PURPOSE. THIS ACREAGE SHOULD BE ADEQUATE TO SUPPORT EXISTING AND FUTURE AIR TOUR ACTIVITIES PLUS ALL ASSOCIATED SUPPORT AND INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITIES. THE SITE IS APPROXIMATELY 12 MILES SOUTH OF THE LAS VEGAS "STRIP" WITH SURFACE ACCESS PROVIDED BY INTERSTATE HIGHWAY 15 AND STATE ROUTE 604 (LAS VEGAS BOULEVARD SOUTH). WE HAVE REVIEWED MANY OTHER POSSIBLE SITES INCLUDING THE LAND FILL ON THE EASTERN RIM OF THE VALLEY AND ANOTHER SITE AT RAILROAD PASS. FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS THE SITE IDENTIFIED IN THIS BILL IS SUPERIOR.

THE LEGISLATIVE PROPOSAL ATTACHES A NUMBER OF CONDITIONS TO THE LAND'S TRANSFER. THESE INCLUDE:

- THE PARCEL IS TO BE USED ONLY AS A HELIPORT;
- THE PARCEL IS NOT TO BE DISPOSED OF BY CLARK COUNTY;
- CLARK COUNTY SHALL PAY ALL ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LAND'S CONVEYANCE FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR;
- THE PARCEL SHALL REVERT TO FEDERAL OWNERSHIP IF THE COUNTY CEASES TO USE IT AS A HELIPORT IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LEGISLATIVE INTENT;
- OPERATORS AT THE NON-URBAN HELIPORT WILL PAY A FEE FOR EACH PASSENGER TRANSPORTED OVER THE SLOAN CANYON NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA;
- SUCH FEES AS MAY BE COLLECTED WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE FOR PROTECTION OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES WITHIN THE CONSERVATION AREA AND THE NORTH MCCULLOUGH MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS AREA;
- TOURS ORIGINATING FROM THE NON-URBAN HELIPORT SHALL CROSS THE CONSERVATION AREA ONLY WITHIN A DEFINED, NARROW, CORRIDOR (EXHIBIT 2 – CLARK COUNTY PUBLIC HELIPORT FACILITY).

THE CCDOA IS COMFORTABLE WITH EACH OF THESE CONDITIONS, SEVERAL OF WHICH REFLECT CONCERNS RAISED BY FEDERAL LAND MANAGERS, NATIVE AMERICAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL INTERESTS. CCDOA IS COMMITTED TO THE IDENTIFICATION, EVALUATION AND, TO THE EXTENT POSSIBLE, THE MITIGATION OF LEGITIMATE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS WHICH MIGHT BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATION OF THE NON-URBAN HELIPORT THROUGH A THOROUGH NEPA REVIEW. IN DOING SUCH A NEPA ANALYSIS, THE COUNTY MUST AND WILL CONSIDER THOSE IMPACTS ASSOCIATED WITH EACH ALTERNATIVE SITE, AS WELL AS THE CONTINUED OPERATION OF HELICOPTER AIR TOURS FROM MCCARRAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT.

THE UNDEVELOPED MOUNTAINOUS AREAS SOUTH OF LAS VEGAS, INCLUDING THE SLOAN CANYON CONSERVATION AREA AND THE NORTH MCCULLOUGH MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS AREA, ALREADY EXPERIENCE NUMEROUS AIRCRAFT OVERFLIGHTS. LOW ALTITUDE MCCARRAN, HENDERSON EXECUTIVE AND BOULDER CITY AIRCRAFT OPERATIONS

COMMONLY OCCUR OVER THESE AREAS. THIS REALITY WAS ACKNOWLEDGED IN THE LEGISLATIVE LANGUAGE THAT ESTABLISHED THE CONSERVATION AND WILDERNESS AREAS JUST TWO YEARS AGO IN 2002. THE ADDITION OF THE HELICOPTER TOUR OPERATIONS IS NOT EXPECTED TO RAISE RELATED NOISE TO FEDERALLY ESTABLISHED LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE. THE NEPA DOCUMENT, WHICH CCDOA IS CURRENTLY DRAFTING TOGETHER WITH THE FAA AND BLM, WILL FULLY CONSIDER NOISE AND OVERFLIGHT IMPACTS ON SENSITIVE POPULATIONS IN THE MANNER PRESCRIBED BY FEDERAL REGULATIONS.

CCDOA OWNS THE “GO KART/SLOAN” SITE, AND HAS FOUND IT TO BE A SUITABLE AND ECONOMICALLY VIABLE LOCATION FOR THE NON-URBAN HELIPORT. THIS SITE, LOCATED ABOUT 3 MILES IMMEDIATELY NORTH OF THE PARCEL DETAILED IN THE SENATOR’S BILL, WAS INITIALLY PREFERRED FOR THE NON-URBAN HELIPORT. SUBSEQUENTLY, THE COMMUNITY ASKED THAT THE “SOUTH OF SLOAN” SITE (WHICH HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED IN THE LEGISLATION) BE ADDED TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL EVALUATION PROCESS. QUITE FRANKLY, THE CCDOA’S CONCERN WAS AND IS THAT “SOUTH OF SLOAN” WILL NOT BE AVAILABLE BECAUSE IT IS FEDERALLY OWNED AND OUTSIDE THE BLM’S DISPOSAL AREA BOUNDARY.

IF “SOUTH OF SLOAN” CANNOT BE CONVEYED IN A TIMELY MANNER, IF UNREASONABLE RESTRICTIONS ARE PLACED ON ITS DEVELOPMENT, AND/OR IF THE UNMITIGATABLE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS ASSOCIATED WITH “SOUTH OF SLOAN” ARE GREATER THAN “GO KART/SLOAN” THE CCDOA INTENDS TO PROCEED WITH DEVELOPMENT AT “GO KART/SLOAN”.

LET ALL UNDERSTAND THAT THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NON-URBAN HELIPORT WITHIN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS IS NEEDED TO PRECLUDE THE SHIFTING OF THE HELICOPTER AIR TOUR OPERATIONS FROM McCARRAN AIRPORT TO THE HENDERSON EXECUTIVE AIRPORT. THIS SIMPLE RELOCATION OF THE HELICOPTER TOUR OPERATIONS TO ANOTHER URBAN AIRPORT WOULD CREATE NEW FLIGHT CORRIDORS OVER EXISTING NEIGHBORHOODS AND THUS ONLY SERVE TO SHIFT NOISE CONCERNS FROM ONE COMMUNITY TO ANOTHER. CLARK COUNTY

ELECTED OFFICIALS HAVE LONG HELD THAT IT IS UNDESIRABLE TO TAKE AN ACTION THAT SIMPLY SHIFTS A BURDEN FROM ONE SET OF NEIGHBORS TO ANOTHER.

IN CONCLUSION, CCDOA, WITH SUPPORT AND COOPERATION FROM THE CONGRESS, THE FAA AND THE BLM, HAS EMBARKED ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW NON-URBAN HELIPORT. THE COUNTY'S INTENT IS TO BALANCE THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF THE AIR TOUR OPERATORS, OUR VALLEY'S RESIDENTS AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNITY. THERE IS NO SIMPLE OR PERFECT ANSWER TO THE HELICOPTER AIR TOUR ISSUE FACED BY CCDOA. NEVERTHELESS, MY AGENCY AND STAFF HAS NOT BACKED AWAY, BUT HAS ATTEMPTED TO FORGE AHEAD AND BARTER A WORKABLE, REASONABLE SOLUTION. WHAT WE ASK CONGRESS FOR IS AN ABILITY TO OBTAIN THE 229 ACRES OF LAND AT THE DESIGNATED "SOUTH OF SLOAN" SITE IF, AT THE END OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW PROCESS, THAT SITE IS DEEMED THE MOST ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVE.

THANK YOU. I AM AVAILABLE TO RESPOND TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE'S QUESTIONS.